

The Oklahoma Quarterly

A Record of Research and Review

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Spring brings out the best in Tulsa's municipal rose garden—a garden of 9,000 plants. For a story of a different kind of garden see "The Development of the English Landscape Garden" on page 21.

A New Myth:

FRENCH INSTABILITY & GERMAN RELIABILITY

By HANS SCHMITT

NOW THAT the twentieth post-war cabinet in France has disappeared in the wings of history, our long-standing convictions regarding French unreliability have deepened. At the same time Germany is increasingly regarded as our stablest and strongest ally on the continent. Our European policy is drawn more closely around a core of sterling German virtue. The fact that Germans, aided by hundreds of millions of U. S. dollars, have been able to rebuild some of their country seems somehow to strike us as miraculous.

In watching this shift, I am reminded that members of nations think of each other in stereotypes. To the American, the Dutch are clean, and the Italians are dirty; Spaniard is proud, and the Chinese are corrupt; the North American is sensible and down to earth, while the Latin American is volatile and emotional.

These libels are applied indiscriminately to friend and foe. The French, though our allies in two world wars, are distrusted. The Germans, our enemies in two world wars, are admired as hard-working and reliable. Such broad generalizations cannot possibly apply to all citizens of one nation. The distinction we make between friend and former enemy is both politically and historically questionable.

Are the Germans really so stable? Are the French really so fickle?

German stability . . . what a wealth of ironic reflections that phrase conjures up. If you were raised in the Germany of the 20's and 30's, you certainly got an eye-full of the hard-working, reliable German's stability. I remember the ballots on election day advertising the wares of no less than 36 political parties, leaving nothing in the political spectrum without a party to express it; I remember May Day in Berlin in the early 30's with 90 dead and injured; I remember a cartoon in a Berlin morning paper that had the whole town in stitches showing Mr. Average Citizen, comic paper fashion, going to the polls six times in one year and being carried out on a stretcher after making his cross for the sixth time. That was some stability, and unfortunately I can see it now.

It was educational to listen in those days,

too. I could hear people talk about the Red uprisings in 1919, about the Kapp Putsch of 1920, about the Bolsheviks running wild in Munich, and the reactionaries four years later doing the same thing in the name of patriotism. I heard about separatists and free-corps, about the Fehme—a political Murder Inc., specializing in clean, odorless, political assassination—and the so-called Black Reichswehr. There was more stability for you.

So what? you will say. You will add in the same breath that all this typified the Weimar Republic, a premature experiment in democracy. The Germans have grown up and learned since then, you may argue. They'll do better next time. But what do we care about what they'll do next time? When you talk about stability in Germany and instability in France, you can talk only of what has happened. You can't talk of next time, only of last time.

Germany as we know it today has presumably existed for somewhat over 80 years. But that is not quite true. Mr. Adenauer's Germany, which after all is the Germany we know today, has existed only since December, 1954.

Nine years before last December Germany was a partitioned colony. Twelve years before that she was a dictatorship. Fourteen years before that she was a rulerless monarchy, and 20 years before that she was a monarchy directed by an all-powerful prime minister. That gets us back to the beginning of a politically unified Germany.

Eighty-five years of history, which at the most cursory of examinations, disintegrate into six very distinct periods!

Perhaps we ought to start at the beginning and fill in a few blanks. The German Empire that was proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on January 18, 1871, represented an essentially satisfied, prosperous nation. All her grievances had been redressed. She wanted nothing more than to preserve a status quo which gave her everything she wanted. Fifteen years later she was beginning to acquire overseas possessions. The wise counsels of Bismarck notwithstanding, the call of adventure on a larger scale proved irresistible. When

Bismarck was dropped, a new Germany, powerful and armed, ambitious in commerce, was leaving solid land thinking that her future lay upon the high seas.

We call this state Germany, but appearances are deceptive. The Germany that went to war in 1914 had no "German" army. Prussian regiments swore an oath of allegiance to the King of Prussia, Bavarians to the King of Bavaria, and so on. This division went deeper than mere formalities.

There is a persistent legend that some lads from the Bavarian back woods rushed to the colors in 1914 thinking that they were being called upon to defend their hearth and home against the Prussians.

Again, one is tempted to think of some personal experiences. My grandmother was a Bavarian, born in 1844. She died in exile . . . in Berlin. And that's how she looked at it to her very last day. Many are the times that she answered the doorbell and then turned to me, an eight-year-old, in complete stupefaction. "I can't understand these people," she would mumble over and over again. "You talk to them."

Whenever I entered a new school in Germany, and that happened several times, I was asked what my nationality was. I proudly answered that I was a Bavarian. As I was born in Prussia, though the son of a Bavarian father, I am not even sure that this was true, but citizens of my part of Prussia considered themselves *Muss-Preussen*. They "had" to be Prussians after 1866 because they had sided with the Austrians, and the Austrians had lost the war.

Germany's federal structure was only abolished by Hitler, who had no more use for the Prussians than my grandmother did. But that is neither here nor there. For Hitler, too, did not provide much in the way of stability, except the grim order of a penitentiary. Again, German stability where art thou?

JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT, let's look at the prospects. You have a nation torn by strife almost from the day it was created in 1871. As diplomats, German incompetence is notorious. No country in modern times has managed to antagonize more people

more frequently with more disastrous results than the Germans have. There is no sign that this talent has grown rusty. When Baron von Neurath, Hitler's foreign minister, was released from Spandau jail recently, President Theodor Heuss of the West German Republic sent him this wire: "I congratulate you on the end of your martyrdom." Even assuming that the ex-protector of Bohemia and Moravia was a martyr, this wire was the kind of political cretinism that Mr. Heuss and his Germans can no longer afford. But it is in keeping with past performance.

Internally, the West German Republic has certainly been more stable than governments in previous German eras. Some of that stability is due to the presence of allied armies, some of it to Konrad Adenauer. Without these two elements the Germans have yet to prove that they can maintain order. In the spring of 1933, when political prophets did not have to examine the entrails of a sacrificial lamb to gain some hint of the future, I heard my father discuss the current state of affairs with a young storm trooper. I can hear it now as this chap repeated again and again, in the monotone of a broken record: "The Germans are undisciplined. What the Germans need is the knout." I have no desire to prove him right, but it would be more reassuring to see more evidence of the Germans proving him wrong.

Germany is now sovereign. She is once more free to be unstable. I join all her friends in hoping that she will not make use of that costly privilege.

My experience with France has been less personal. In her case the record is pretty clear. For the first 800 years of her history France was one of the stablest, and during much of the time, the most powerful state in Europe. When she overthrew her king in 1792, this changed. Until 1870 she made a number of experiments to re-

gain that lost shore of stability. Finally, after much trial and error, the French founded a Republic which was born a few months before the German Empire. Except for four years of German occupation that Republic has enjoyed an uninterrupted existence ever since.

Issues and policies have remained remarkably uniform in spite of the frequent turnover of prime ministers.

Even that turnover is deceptive. The French themselves have a proverb about things remaining the same the more they change. That's certainly true in France. If you just take the period since 1945 and look at the twenty cabinets that have come and gone, you will find the same key men successfully holding on to the same key jobs. From 1945 till 1952, for instance, we in the United States had five different secretaries of state. During that same period France had two different foreign ministers. The continuity of policy during that period has been remarkable. Within limits it is safe to say that the rapid turnover of prime ministers is necessary to maintain policies which transcend a mere cabinet.

When we complain today about France's unreasonable distrust of Germany, do we realize that we are accusing her of being infuriatingly consistent? Whatever we may accuse her of—stupidity, short-sightedness, whatever you prefer—inconsistency or instability of purpose is certainly not one of her shortcomings. If it turns out that the French are wrong in nurturing the German menace above all others, their error will consist of a fundamental consistency. Once the French hew to a line, they seem to stick with it until the deluge. Both individually and collectively, the French are deeply stirred by tradition.

One of the most persistent current problems arises from the fact that France's middle of the road governments have on

occasion united in the same political coalition, the Catholic M.R.P. and the Socialists. Traditionally, a French Catholic would just as soon vote with the devil as vote with a Socialist, and vice versa. This attitude has not changed since the beginning of the French Republic. Still, that middle of the road coalition has not ceased to function. The extreme right of General de Gaulle is disintegrating, and the extreme left is losing ground, though slowly; but the center parties with all their age-old feuds and differences, which are stable and everlasting as the old Roman viaducts at Arles, have stuck together . . . and for the sake of that very stability of which we think the French are incapable. There is no counterpart to this in the political history of modern Germany.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that both nations have very distinctive political ways of their own. Both are democracies at present, and yet their political practices are thoroughly different from our own. In order to work with either or both, we shall have to take them as they are. We must certainly refrain from making them over in our own image. In that sense this problem of stability is really irrelevant. At the root of our misconceptions is the understandable habit of comparing others with ourselves and then judging them on the basis of that comparison. That is not going to get us anywhere.

We must take the German as he is and establish a working partnership with him on that basis. We must do the same with the Frenchman. After all, they have to take us as we are, in fact, they'd better. Only then can this magic word stability be applied where it really matters, to the great Western Alliance, whose survival is tantamount to our own.

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A BIT OF REASON

These reasonings are unconnected: "I am richer than you, therefore I am better"; "I am more eloquent than you, therefore I am better." The connection is rather this: "I am richer than you, therefore my property is greater than yours"; "I am more eloquent than you, therefore my style is better than yours." But you, after all, are neither property nor style.

The Enchiridion, or Manual, of Epictetus. XLIV

Translation by Elizabeth Carter.

STRICTLY HONORABLE

Therefore let this law be established in friendship: neither ask dishonorable things, nor do them, if asked.

Cicero, *De Amicitia*, IX, 38.

Translation by W. A. Falconer.

About the Author



Dr. Hans Schmitt was born in Frankfurt; his father was a German, his mother, an American. His preparatory education was received in the Netherlands. He came to this country in the 30's, and graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1940. His doctorate was taken at the University of Chicago in 1953. During World War II he was a First Lieutenant in the Military Intelligence Service, being discharged in August 1946. A member of the Southern and the American Historical Associations, he has contributed to the Chicago Review and the Journal of Modern History. He joined the University faculty as Assistant Professor of History, and has already established himself as an excellent teacher and an eloquent speaker.